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Jacques-Albert Buttat, a Pioneer of Hindu-Christian Dialogue

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work for the cosmic welfare, the welfare of all beings, which is the concern of all religions. Taking inspiration and motivation from one's faith tradition we could work together for building up a community which is based on certain values—human dignity, justice, equality, communal harmony, respect for one another and so on. Here the emphasis is shifted because of the task-oriented approach. In a world of today either we hang together as a human community or we destroy ourselves in various ways. No human problem is so unique to one particular community alone and no one community can solve it without reference to the other in a country like India or for that matter anywhere in the world.

In that process we discover one another, we discover ourselves first in the presence of the other in such a new venture and the world of others with their mystery of life that eludes clear conceptualisation but still is mediated through a set of symbols and myths, though each one may not be able to articulate what they mean to oneself or one's own community. We begin to realize that it is not always the questions of who is right and who is wrong, not always an either/or. Sometimes both truth and error are present without eliminating error. Opposites do co-exist and in life things do not neatly arrange themselves as contradiction and convergence. One cannot eradicate what is "false". To perceive this mystery of reality is a sign of maturity. To let oneself be shaped by the reality and not trying to force reality to be what we would like them to be is a sign of wisdom.

References

1. Cf. Wilhelm Halbfass: *Indien und Europa* Schwabe & Co. AG Verlag. Basel/Stuttgart. 1981, p. 191.
2. Sita Ram Goel's book *Catholic Ashrams* is an attack on dialogue as sponsored by all the ashrams. Actually it is a collection of material from the West and from Madras.
3. Halbfass, p. 54.
4. It is the title of chapter in *India and the Germans* by Walter Leifer, Shakuntala Publishing House, Bombay, 1977 (second edition).
5. Cf. Felix Wilfred: "Dialogue Gasping for Breath?" in *Vidyajyoti*, Journal of Theological Reflection. Vol. LI. No.10, 1987, pp. 449-466.

Jacques-Albert Buttat, a Pioneer of Hindu-Christian Dialogue

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The name Buttat does not seem to appear often in current dialogue literature in spite of the key role which he played in getting Hindu-Christian dialogue in India on the way. Dr. J.A. Buttat, son of a wealthy Swiss banker, had been professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne before being called to serve as Ambassador of Switzerland to India. His appointment had much to do with his own interests. He had been an avid student of Indian thought for many years and quickly established a personal friendship with Jawaharlal Nehru and, to a lesser degree, with Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. As he told it, it was the study of Indian philosophy, especially of Vedanta, which brought him, after a period of agnosticism, to a deepened understanding and appreciation of Christianity. His Christianity was ecumenical in the widest possible sense. Soon after his arrival in India he began contacting Christian clergy interested in an encounter with Indian religions and held a first meeting in Almora in 1961 with a group of about fifteen Christians from a variety of denominations. Already before his arrival in India he had published a book *Le rencontre des religions* (Paris 1957), later translated into English under the title *The Encounter of Religions* (1960) which served as the focus of the discussions. As Ambassador in New Delhi he must have had a fairly busy life; during his tenure Switzerland got involved in a great many development projects which he personally supervised. His deepest interest and his most sincere intellectual love, however, belonged to Hindu-Christian dialogue. He personally funded what later became known as the "Buttat group", which held several memorable meetings until a tragic accident ended his career as Ambassador and his involvement in dialogue. While the agenda for the meetings of the group were always planned by the whole group, Dr. Buttat's intellectual contributions were always a major factor. In spite of his social status and his recognized intellectual standing he never tried to dominate the meetings but came as a student who engaged with fellow-students in the study of a new subject. From the very beginning the group worked with a document prepared by Dr. Buttat, which, enlarged and refined over the years, became a kind of basic text to ponder and live with. It eventually appeared in an expanded form as a booklength essay: "l'expérience Chrétienne est-elle capable d'assumer la

spiritualité orientale?" in a volume *La mystiques et les mystiques* ed. by A. Ravier (Desclee 1965). One of the key elements which the group learned from Dr. Buttat was the notion of the "inner dialogue" which must precede "external dialogue". It was Dr. Buttat again, who gently but firmly steered the meetings away from being scholarly conferences about dialogue, to actual exercises in dialogue, and who impressed upon all the need to develop methods for an encounter of spiritualities rather than to merely engage in comparative religion. Already in the early sixties Dr. Buttat used his ambassadorial contacts to urge the Vatican to establish an official Dialogue-Secretariate. In India itself, he persuaded Cardinal Gracias of Bombay to initiate a process of consultation among Catholic bishops and other clergy interested in Hindu-Christian dialogue. He tirelessly pursued these concerns, which were crowned with some measure of success. In 1964 Pope Paul VI opened a "Secretariate for Non-Christians" and Cardinal Gracias began taking some personal interest in Hindu-Christian dialogue. Just when Hindu-Christian dialogue seemed to take off in India Dr. Buttat was tragically removed from the scene. What actually happened has not yet been fully explained. Dr. Buttat was on official business in Colombo/Sri Lanka, which was part of his ambassadorial jurisdiction. One morning he was found lying on the ground below his first story hotel room, unconscious, with a severe head injury. It appeared that he had fallen down from his room, possibly while pushing open a glass door, to get some fresh air into the room. While falling he must have struck a concrete flower pot on the ground. For months he was in a sort of coma. He had suffered a severe brain injury. Brought back to Switzerland, he spent years in a sanatorium. Friends who visited him found him reminiscing about the years in India and the dialogue-group meetings, but otherwise not fully in possession of his once formidable intellectual powers. Dr. Buttat now lives in retirement in Switzerland. Sooner or later someone will write a book about this remarkable man and his crucial contribution to the development of Hindu-Christian dialogue. Hopefully someone will continue the line of profound thought which he initiated and address the depth-dimensions of the Hindu-Christian encounter which often appear to be left out in the more practical and foreground issues dealt with today.